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Introduction

A Gun for Every Girl: Girlhood in Contemporary Visual Culture

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The title of this special issue appropriates Jean-Luc Godard's axiom, "All you need to make a good film is a girl and a gun."[1] Countless films, TV shows, and advertisements follow its logic: while the gun directs the action and is the catalyst for narrative progression, the girl holds the audience's gaze and centers their desire. This conjunction has been deployed throughout art and popular culture, in multiple contexts and toward myriad ends. It is an accurate and concise description of hegemonic visual culture, one that has been critiqued by feminist film theorists since the 1970s, most notably by Laura Mulvey in her iconic essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). Despite the fact that it has been a perennial target of feminist critique, the formula named by Godard remains pervasive. Expanding on these critiques, this issue considers the limitations of the axiom while experimenting with critical modes through which it may be redeployed to feminist ends. Our aim is to explore what happens in moments when the girl takes the gun. We ask how this weaponized girl may trouble the material and symbolic violence done to her by visual cultures that value her as an image but not as an agent.

Godard used a gun and a girl as a narrative framework; we are appropriating his formula as a rhetorical device. For us, the weaponized girl is not a girl with an actual gun committing violent acts, but one who pushes against hegemonic visual culture to do violence to its forms. The weaponized girl remixes the signs and symbols available to her to create new subversive meanings. She disrupts rather than affirms. Through the act of appropriation, of taking the gun, the girl is released from the conjunction (the "and") and seizes control of the means of narrative progression. The essays in this issue make legible moments when "the girl" appropriates what was never meant for her in the first place—hijacking the means of signification, thinking philosophically, using consumer and techno culture against itself, reframing the discourses of her own girlhood.

A Gun for Every Girl was conceived as a space for methodological experimentation and the deconstruction of oppressive imagery. Although our title plays a rhetorical game, we are acutely aware that representations are never innocent. As Stuart Hall (1988) has shown, representations are a meaningful site of political struggle because they have a dialectical relationship to lived reality. If we understand that representation is always historically specific and contingent, then we can begin to see the ways that it shapes culture while privileging certain interests and structures of power. When cultural productions instrumentalize girls for sexist and capitalist fantasies and agendas, they are also contributing to the social scripts that define what it means to inhabit the category of identity "girl." These hegemonic representations delimit the conditions of possibility of the identities and experiences of actual girls. How can refigurations of the girl enact different political projects?

Since the 1980s, Girls' Studies scholars, including Catherine Driscoll and Angela McRobbie, have interrogated the mutually forming pressures of representations and lived realities in shaping the identities and experiences of socially and self-defined girls, showing how girls have been able to rework the signs and symbols of patriarchal culture––the images and texts of girlhood that are available to them—to create new and even subversive meanings.[2] For Driscoll, girl culture (that is, cultural forms produced by and for actual girls) is marked by "an irresolvable tension between agency and conformity" (2002, 278). This argument builds on an earlier one, made by McRobbie, who suggests that the cultural spaces that girls carve for themselves (whether public or private) are ambiguous, necessarily drawing on and reproducing hegemonic ideas about femininity at the same time that they may subvert them (2000 [1980], 42). Put differently, girls themselves make use of the malleability and indeterminacy of the images they are called on to embody *against* the pressure to conform to these images. They do not merely emulate these images but creatively engage with them.

Debates about the malleability, or plasticity,[3] attributed to girls have come to a fever pitch in the past few years, following the 2012 English translation of *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of The Young-Girl* (2001) by neo-Situationist Franco-Italian collective Tiqqun. Following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Tiqqun use the "Young Girl" as a cipher, in this case a cipher for the all-pervasive logic of semio-capitalism.[4] In doing so, they follow a long line of thinkers on the right and on the left who link girls to capitalism, not only as ideal impressionable consumers but also as ideal, endlessly transformable commodities. However, while Tiqqun endeavor to speak though (and for) the Young Girl, in their diagnosis of the contemporary situation, they are also constantly interrupted by girls—internally, by the slogans appropriated from girl culture that are spattered throughout their collage-like text, and externally, by the criticisms that actual "girls" have brought to bear on it. In Tiqqun's *Preliminary Theory*, the "Young Girl" the collective attempts to theorize has a troubling effect. Even when the girl is asked to be *anyone*, as Tiqqun would have it, she finds a way to refuse.

Material, space, way of being, weapon: these are but a few of the modes through which the girl manifests within this issue. While the seeming incongruity of her forms and politics as collected in these essays can be troubling, there is productivity in the messiness of her appearances. The girl refuses to sit still or even to arrive upon demand. This is, of course, evidence of her status as both a fact and a fiction. In this special issue, it remains clear that, as Jacqueline Mabey states in her essay, "there is no Young Girl, only young girls."

In "Not Mine Alone, Nor Mine to Own: Some Reflections on the Young Girl," Mabey opens the issue with a critical reflection on her experiences as a curator, on the deployment of the girl in contemporary art, and on that which informs both of these subjects, her identification with and among girls. As an experience, subject, and frame for creating and curating art, girlhood here vacillates between life experience, collective identity, and, as she writes, a "productive model for everyday imaginative resistance." The slipperiness of this movement is welcomed and is a mode of operating that can be found, to various degrees, in each of the essays present here.

For Mabey, and for artist Nicole Killian, that slippery quality finds an apt metaphor in hacking. As a cog in heterosexist machineries of meaning making, the disruptive potential of hacking when performed, enacted, or embodied as feminist intervention can recode that which has long been authorized by and for patriarchy. For Killian, the girl embodies this function within cyberspace as she incessantly produces and circulates alternative ways of being and knowing. Calling forth Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, Killian's writing conjures a digital girl-topia governed by a veritable pantheon of heroines, including feminist hackers, social-media-savvy Tumblr girls, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and Sailor Moon. Through their self-fashioning and transgressive appropriations of heterosexist cyberculture, Killian proposes, these figures have recalibrated computer and digital technologies in ways that have mobilized them as "prosthetic feminized weapons for the girl."

Resisting the dematerializing and disembodied political hyperbole of Killian's creative intervention, Jen Kennedy's engagement with the feminist potential of the cybersphere forges a decidedly more complicated, if not controversial, relationship between the material and the immaterial. While she agrees that the digital sphere has been particularly generative for feminist activity as a vehicle for staging disruptions of patriarchal culture, it also, she adds, "complicates the historical distinction between subjects and objects." In her contribution, "Acting Objects/Objecting 'Girls': Anne Hirsch's *Playground*,"Kennedy reads Hirsch's 2013 performative piece against the grain of feminist narratives that insist on a one-way trajectory from a base feminine objectivity to an elevated subjectivity. This unilateral move, she proposes, is refused in Hirsch's *Playground*,if not made entirely untenable. The collapsing of the subject/object opposition, however, is not an artistic performance of alternative imaginings but, rather, a staging of lived conditions under neoliberal capitalist culture in the digital age. In *Playground*, Kennedy reads the slippage of objectification and sexual self-discovery produced in Hirsch's restaging of a "cybersex adventure" that the artist experienced as a teen as both evidence of the imbrication of the material and the immaterial and as an emancipatory articulation of girlhood produced from within, rather than outside of, the heterosexist capitalist imaginary. Hirsch's work, Kennedy argues, "does not carve out an authentic self or experience beyond or even amid the proliferation of images, texts, and discourses around girls" in the same way many of the other authors within this issue position their feminist subjects. Rather, "Its aim is to find the emancipatory potential of *participating in* these images." Recognizing the status of the girl as always-already object, Kennedy's text proposes a mode of feminist working from *within* systems of oppression rather than imaging alternatives that depend on the possibly utopic notion of working from *outside* or creating a *without*.

Foregrounding the material conditions of girlhood, Nakeya Brown's text, "A Delicate Knot: Photographing Black Girlhood and Womanhood," reflects on the artist's photographic practice and the central role hair has played in her experiences of transition from girlhood to womanhood. In both image and text, Brown captures the paradoxical relationship many black women and girls have with their hair as both a distinct marker of cultural identity and a site where racist normative conceptions of beauty precipitate often painful grooming rituals. "This pain," Brown writes, "is mostly endured in the privacy of

our kitchens, bathrooms, living rooms, and salons." The collective yet invisible experiences of hair care suggested in Brown's photographs are offered as neither fully celebratory nor critical. They hover somewhere in between, like the adolescent moving between the identities of child and adult, not having yet departed nor arrived at either.

In a number of the photographs from Brown's series *The Refutation of "Good" Hair*, hair is presented as food, suggesting nourishment. Two of the photographs included in this issue show women eating tufts of hair. While the thought of ingesting hair may cause one to recoil, the women in these images stare defiantly at the camera. The confidence and certainty with which they hold hair in their mouths and between their teeth belie the discomfort of the act. One of the women consuming hair appears to have a freshly shaven head, suggesting self-cannibalism. The self-ingestion is both a destructive and internalizing gesture that manages to move the object of refusal, in this case "good hair," closer to rather than further away from the body. This movement recalls the xenophagic behavior described in Aliza Shvarts's essay, "Nonconsensual Collaborations, 2012–present: Notes on a Shared Condition." A phenomenon noted in various scientific disciplines, xenophagy refers broadly to a change in patterns of consumption as a mode of survival or resistance to attack. Although Shvarts references this term in relation to her desire for "that which is not meant for her," we can read Brown's hair-ingesting women as performing consumption as a mode of reclamation.

In her contribution, Shvarts recounts a series of interpersonal exchanges as a means to "aestheticize consent"—that is, to reimagine consent through social encounters that function outside of the economies of exchange in which it is conventionally deployed. Pointing to the ways consent operates within systems of exchange as either a "negotiation about property" or "a waiving of liability," Shvarts offers the noncollaborative as a performative operation of relationality that is distinctly aesthetic. The nonconsensual, she proposes, can be a "mechanism of agency," a proposition that sits uneasily in relation to the longstanding sociopolitical definitions of consent in legal and feminist discourses on gendered violence. Just as she is always already object, the girl may well be culturally coded as perpetually unable to confirm or deny consent, an ideological exemption that has remained a necessary prop for the maintenance of heterosexist patriarchal order. As the only mode within which girls can operate under neoliberal capitalism, Shvarts recalibrates the nonconsensual as a resource for the production of art and of personal agency. "Predation," as she writes, "becomes a feminist critique."

The modes of intervention and infiltration that are proposed by the authors within this issue are both ideological and material. In her contribution, "Depths of Surface: Leisure/Crime, Immaterial Labor, and the Performance of the Teenage Girl in Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers* (2012) and Sofia Coppola's *The Bling Ring* (2013)," Maryn Wilkinson argues for a reading of the films in which the spectacularly vapid iconography of the girl is, in fact, a nuanced representation of the often invisible forms of immaterial labor valorized by contemporary capitalism. In the rapidly shifting terrain of economic and social exchange expedited by digital and telecommunication technologies, the girl, for Wilkinson, has become the preeminent producer of that most feminized of forms of immaterial labor: affect. As the girl-identified protagonists in *Spring Breakers* and *The*

Bling Ring indulge in crimes *for* and *as* leisure (respectively), they rupture normative modes of meaning making, production, consumption, and exchange, dislodging the girl from her place within the systems of exchange that have long depended upon her passivity and objectivity to generate value.

"Recycling" and "reclaiming," rather than appropriation, are the terms used by Josh Franco to describe the work of the Chicana artist collective Más Rudas. In "Más Rudas Collective, 2009–2016 (An Archival Epilogue to an Epic Pachanga)," Franco links the contemporary creative and curatorial practices of Más Rudas Collective (MRC) to materials housed in Tomás Ybarra-Frausto's Chicano/a art archive. Rather than create a patrilineal trajectory from collector/historian to MRC, Franco is interested in weaving a dialogue between bodies, objects, and images across a shared cultural history that, as all histories do, privileges some voices and images over others.

Staunchly claiming their Chicana heritage and identity, the members of MRC refuse, as Franco states, to "succumb to the anxiety … of being pigeonholed for making such claims." In their identity-based practice, the collective calls upon a variety of symbols and traditions from the Chicano/a sociocultural lexicon, such as the quinceañera. In their conjurings of the experiences and histories that shape their Mexican American identities, the members of MRC reimagine them. Describing *Our Debut* (2009), for example, the collective characterize the work as a "quinceañera without the patriarchy." In this instance, a ritual marking the passage of young girls into womanhood is unsettled from its foundations in heteropatriarchal familial and Catholic structures and authored, instead, by the honorees themselves.

"Más rudas" means to be unapologetically tough or defiant, a sentiment that runs throughout this special issue. However, the capacity to refuse or defy is unevenly distributed among the girls within these pages, depending upon their different positions as raced, classed, sexed, and gendered subjects.[5] In other words, every girl's potential to rebel or have her rebellion made visible is contingent on her relationship to hierarchies of power. The legibility of defiance for brown, black, and queer girls, for example, is radically different than that of cisgendered able-bodied white girls. Recognizing this, the dialogue that the essays in this issue generate is fostered in a spirit of feminist discord and open debate rather than consensus. As editors, we believe that this dissonance is the appropriate, if not the only, condition in which the girl can thrive. The girl's contradictory state of objectified subjectivity or her status as image-object-subject, mobilized as is it either for or against her, defies singularity. As such, efforts to codify a "right" feminist approach to theorizing or politicizing her are futile. The political force of the girl, her potential to become a weapon against the machineries of capitalist patriarchy that instrumentalize her, depends upon her continued refusal to be stilled. "This is a spell for getting out of girlhood alive" (Joni Murphy).

Notes

1. While there has been some debate about the original author of this line (Godard or Griffith), our interest is in its rhetorical possibilities more than its origin. For more information about the statement's history and use, see Lack 2017.

2. See, especially, Driscoll 2002, McRobbie 2007, Harris 2004, and Projansky 2014.

3. The "plasticity" of the figure of the girl in contemporary culture is discussed at length in Crow 2014.

4. The figure of the "little girl" or "Alice" (named after the protagonist of Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass and Alice's Adventures in Wonderland) appears in several key texts by Deleuze and Guattari, most significantly in A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia and The Logic of Sense. For a feminist détournement of Deleuze and Guattari's "little girl," see Grosz 1994.

5. We understand that this list is not complete and that subjects are articulated across multiple positionalities.

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